

Sowing Seeds to Cultivate Future Army Leaders

By COL Rick Nussio

With the continuous deployment of units over the past nine years and before that, to a lesser extent, the peace operations in Bosnia and Kosovo, the U.S. Army has lost many of its core competencies and training skills. One of those degraded skills is officer professional development (OPD). Bearing the urgent need emphasized by a number of forward thinkers and the stark reality the Army faces with more deployments, it remains imperative that the U.S. Army officer corps increasingly emphasize its professional development programs.

In recent publications, GEN Martin E. Dempsey, commander, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), emphasized the importance of properly educating our military leaders in order to better prepare them to meet future challenges. Similarly, in the Spring 2010 issue of *Parameters*, researchers from the RAND Corporation illuminated the needs and requirements for growing strategic leaders.

Clearly, military leaders have a responsibility to the nation and its citizens to prepare for future threats and challenges. All commissioned officers should reflect upon their oath and consider their individual preparedness for those challenges, against all enemies, foreign and domestic. Unit leaders in particular bear a unique responsibility in the nurturing and growth of subordinates to prepare them not only in their current position, but for future service as well.

Officers today spend far more time under the influence and command of leaders than in TRADOC institutions. While myriad professional resources are available to officers with the initiative to want to develop themselves professionally, true responsibility rests with commanders—especially senior commanders—to implement a vibrant leader development program. Long after today's leaders retire from the profession, their subordinates will carry

the torch and lead the Army into an always uncertain future.

According to GEN Dempsey, lack of imagination is a root cause of the lack of professional development. Many leaders of the pre-9/11 Army may recall the days when OPD was centered on studying a famous battle or military action and relearning the lessons hammered into them as young officers at their commissioning source. Lead-

ers must depart from the "old school" style of thinking and embrace innovative ways to shape and educate young officers. While there are times when leaders must study doctrine, historical battles and tactics, such focus should be separate from leader development. OPD must be designed to cultivate thinkers and analysts, visionary leaders who are adaptive to new environments and can operate successfully in

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complex situations. Producing master tacticians is a task for TRADOC when Army officers attend knowledge centers of excellence; growing quality future leaders within an organization is the mark of an excellent leader.

Given the limited amount of time for OPD in today's Army of cyclical deployment, a two-hour-per-month OPD program can pay dividends that far exceed the monthly investment. Developing future leaders must be both mental and physical; to maximize efficiencies, one hour per month should be devoted to each sphere of OPD. One hour per month over a lunch period for a question-based-and-led discussion and another for a morning PT session are not hard to carve out of a monthly training schedule.

In addition, the OPD must be executed outside of unit training on core or required competencies. This is the only way to ensure that the broadening aspect of the program is met. Properly selected and focused subjects will ensure that the time is well utilized. Individual ownership of the program is critical. Involve the officers in subject selection. It is likely from time to time that leaders may end up outside

their comfort zone, but that is the whole point of the program, which is not designed to make officers experts and masters but to broaden their exposure to new concepts and to challenge their physical condition.

Officers must be physically ready to confront the challenges of the modern battlefield. True physical development involves exposing different muscle groups to new stressors. Muscles need to be challenged through a variety of activities. Consider a program that could include mountain biking, soccer, swimming, ultimate football, water polo, roller hockey, and incorporate the Modern Army Combatives program. Variety leads to immeasurable benefits. Officers will forge new bonds with each other while participating in the shared challenge of a new physical activity. At the same time, leaders are able to better assess those who serve within the command. Natural leaders will emerge, as well as some who might have been lurking in the shadows but require a push or nudge to expose their true potential.

There may be other consequences as well. One may notice less than desir-

able leadership traits that otherwise may not have been observed. The officer who continues to miss the physical OPD is quite possibly someone who does not want to perform in front of others. Allow the junior officers to select, organize and execute one of the monthly sessions, or all of them, to simultaneously develop their leadership skills. It should remain, however, the unit commander's program, and it must never lose focus on the primary goal of routinely challenging officers in the physical realm while forcing them to perform physical activities they normally do not execute. One session per month will not improve their physical condition; this remains an individual officer's responsibility. Yet this part of the OPD program is a good monthly azimuth check on the health, morale and individual fitness level of the officers within any organization.

The mental portion of the program must be precisely planned; preparation is essential. The topic should be complex, but the execution easy. A brief article, distributed with enough time to be read in advance, can quickly spark discussion. A single chapter from a popular book written on a current, relevant

topic may inspire many to finish the book. The challenge for the leader is to do the reading ahead of time and develop several pertinent questions that assist in guiding the discussion, which should not be prescriptive; if the discussion flows in a direction opposite to the intended course but remains useful, let it follow its own course. Officers will benefit more from the free exchange of information. Talk about social issues, politics, law and social trends, but avoid patterns in which the discussion migrates to a popular and easy topic such as the current combat situation in theater. The key is to expand horizons.

Topic selection is critical because it must broaden officers' horizons to expose them to unfamiliar concepts and to see events and issues from alternative perspectives. (Many graduate-school business programs have excellent reading lists devoted to management and leadership topics.) A sample list might include reading the opening chapter of Thomas Friedman's *The World Is Flat*, followed by a study of the Japanese strategy game Go, and end with a chapter from Frank Holt's *Into the Land of Bones: Alexander the Great in Afghanistan*.

Leaders must maintain relevance while ensuring that the broadening aspect of the program is met. Do not hesitate to invite senior leaders to participate or to brief the chain of command on the quarterly plan. Senior leaders should have their own list of readings that they believe will broaden the development of subordinates. Allowing officers to nominate topics will temper the full intellectual capacity of the organization. Officers will develop a sense of ownership in the program if given the chance to provide input and even lead one of the discussions. At the end of each session, solicit feedback on the value of the subject. As with the physical portion of the program, watch for the officer who rarely participates, is afraid to speak or only attends because it is mandatory. This is all part of the observation process that enables the intellectual and mental evaluation of individual officers. While one hour per month will not develop the next Army Chief of Staff, it is imperative to plant the seeds of new ideas and concepts early into our junior leaders. What germinates from these new concepts depends on future experiences, training and ongoing leader development.

The selection of topics and physical events to choose from are limitless, and the efficiencies gained by a monthly program focusing once in the physical realm and once in the mental realm are endless. Not only does this program enable the development of future leaders, organizations will reap the rewards from the added camaraderie, and the individual evaluation of junior leaders' strengths and weaknesses will be more refined. Above all, resist the temptation to believe OPDs are a waste of time and resources; instead, embrace the opportunity to develop subordinates who can have a larger impact on the future Army. Professional military leaders cannot afford to wring their hands and complain about not having enough time. For the future of our Army and our nation, leaders must cultivate subordinates today who will bear all the burdens of a complex world upon their shoulders tomorrow. □

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